

# SAT scores jump in Montgomery, D.C.

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## *'Mind-boggling' scores for Md. county close in on rival Fairfax*

SAT scores soared in the District of Columbia and Montgomery County last year, while Fairfax County students' scores -- the highest in the area -- flatlined.

Maryland students posted a five-point spike, the biggest increase among states with at least 70 percent participation. Nationwide, scores remained flat, a trend also seen in Virginia.

The average score for D.C. students -- including public, private and charter schools -- shot up 26 points to 1,404 out of 2,400 from 1,378 in 2009. Despite the significant gain, scores still fell below the 1,509 national average, which didn't budge from last year.

SAT scores in Montgomery jumped 38 points to a record-breaking average of 1,653, a boom compared with last year's one-point drop. Scores were up among all demographic groups, with Hispanic and black students showing the biggest improvements of 54 and 49 points, respectively.

The College Board, which administers the SAT, added an 800-point writing section for the class of 2006, pushing the perfect score to 2,400.

Fairfax County retained its bragging rights by a lean 11 points over Montgomery. Its combined score of 1,664 remained unchanged from 2009, with math and reading scores just above its across-the-Potomac rival -- but the Maryland county surpassed Fairfax in writing for the second year in a row.

"Fairfax is obviously doing a great job for their students too," Montgomery County Public Schools spokesman Dana Tofig said. "People like to compare us with them because they're both excellent school systems, but we're not focused on Fairfax. We're focused on our kids."

Montgomery students' scores on all three sections increased by more than 10 points. The combined math and reading sections set a school system record of 1,106 out of 1,600.

School officials attributed the jump to Superintendent Jerry Weast's 11-year crusade to close the "achievement gap" between black and Hispanic students and their higher-performing white and Asian peers. More than 50 percent of Montgomery students scored above 1,650 in this year's test, a number that county officials have called a college-ready benchmark.

"We expect all of our students to challenge themselves with rigorous classes regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status," Deputy Superintendent Frieda K. Lacey said. "They are showing us that they can meet and well exceed those expectations."

Still, participation dropped in Montgomery, particularly among blacks and Hispanics, with 10 percent fewer students in both groups taking the test.

Educational analysts say that drop could have propped up the results and that Montgomery school officials are "not telling the truth."

"When you reduce your test-taking population, scores will go up because only the cream of the crop are taking it," said Robert Schaeffer, public education director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing in Cambridge, Mass. "But that might not be a better thing -- that may mean fewer students are thinking about college."

Schaeffer said a 38-point spike in one year is "mind-boggling" and "merits an investigation."

"It may be that low-scoring students were dissuaded from taking the test," he said. The percentage of county students taking the SAT dropped from 78.0 percent in 2009 to 71.4 percent.

Tofig attributed the participation drop to more students taking the ACT instead. But compared with last year, just 4.7 percent more African-American students and 3.2 more Hispanic students took only the ACT -- explaining less than half of the drop.

Officials with D.C. Public Schools did not comment on the scores.

The flat national score was a positive sign because higher participation rates tend to drive down average scores, College Board officials said. Nearly 1.6 million students took the SAT in 2010, up more than 67,000 students from 2009.